

The Meaning of Death in Education from an Heideggerian Perspective

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The paper explores the meaning of death in education to examine the possibility of teaching death from a Heideggerian perspective. Teaching death itself appears unlikely to achieve the aim of death education, overcoming the fear of death, if it could not include one's own death, the utmost fear. The educational practices for death appear to help students to understand what is to be learned in terms of the need to attain knowledge whilst this still seems to leave one's own death behind, to leave this utmost fear out of the picture. In this paper, considering other's death is defined as impersonalised death. In Heidegger's philosophy, human beings appear possible to consider their own death since death is no more than being-toward-death: the human being lives in a condition in which 'I am dying' from the birth. Besides, the care-structure of Dasein involves its being-ahead-of-itself, and the anticipating of death opens the possibility of being authentic. Therefore, death education can consider the issue, one's own death as the most fear. Finally, wellbeing in educational practices for death is approached as a state of happiness in a sense of contingency. In Heidegger's analysis contingency appears in human mortality and temporality in relation to death as existential characteristics of Dasein.

It is a common saying in thanatology (the study of death and dying) that 'wellbeing is well-dying'. Although this phrase may seem to be relevant mostly to people who are old and nearing death, the basic concept of wellbeing here regards dying as part of living. In this respect death education in general also has dragged death into educational practice as a subject of wellbeing. The foundation of the idea is that we can come to see our lives as more meaningful through reflecting on death.

At this point death education seems to be possible to *teach death* in the same way of teaching other subjects and topics. When we teach math, for instance, it is assumed that students can actually understand, or have the ability to acquire an understanding of, concepts of number, space, and so on, and this assumption is supported by philosophy and psychology, etc. In contrast, there is little reason to believe that by studying death as a subject children can actually come to *understand* it or *overcome the fear of death*, which death education supposedly aims for.¹

Besides, what is taught in death education tends to cover across those social and cultural aspects that are reflected in others' deaths whilst little attention seems to be paid on death itself, especially one's own death. And yet it seems understandable that it must be others' deaths that are the focus of attention since no one can experience their own death.

My starting point is the following question: Can *death* be taught in such a way as to address the meaning of one's own death. In doing so, I want to discover ways in which, in such educational practice, an understanding of human mortality in Heideggerian terms can be realised.

THE PRACTICE OF DEATH EDUCATION

On the way to find the meaning of death, it is necessary here to consider *how* death education has been conducted, in which the assumption is made that death is something to be taught. In this respect I would like to briefly explore the practices of current death education for our relation to death.

Unlike the academic research in relation to death, the public attitude toward death appears, according to a survey conducted by BBC (ICM research, 2006; Tsiris et al, 2011, p. 97), to have changed little over the last half of the century. In the words of Philippe Ariès, there is, in contrast to the past, a tendency to hide death in darkness, away from our cheerful society (Ariès, 1998). In fact, for the majority of people death is still a subject that they would not wish to consider in daily life until it is absolutely inevitable. Issues related to death are often, as a result, matters of social taboo, with thoughts hidden from the public and an internalisation of fear.

In this respect death education has emphasised that death should be discussed openly without hesitation or fear, so that reflecting on death enriches our lives and makes them more meaningful. The result of death education, as a consequence, is expected as a desire to live happily (or, we may say, for 'wellbeing') while facing up to tragedy and psychological trauma, and all the shadow images of these.

The dimension of aims in death education is roughly divided into an interpretation of death that teaches 1) that there are diverse aspects of death and dying, 2) that we are consumers of medical and funeral services, 3) that we can improve our living quality through careful consideration of death, 4) that we can manage our lives well in relation to the deaths of others as well as to our own death, and 5) that we need to make up our minds about death in social and ethical terms (Gibson, Robert and Buttery, 1982, p. 14). Through the dimensions, death education supposedly accomplishes its purpose by teaching social and ethical values, and attitudes and understandings appropriate to death, and the fear of death can be overcome by sharing images of death.

Death education has been practised in several ways: a part of school curriculum and life-long education, through literature for children, and as a part of health welfare. Among the various means, it is worth introducing one of the notable cases of death education that has recently been conducted in relation to health promotion and the performing arts. This is called the '*St Christopher's Schools Project*', and it was launched by St Christopher's Hospice in London, UK. Over the last six years (2005–2011) the schools project has built up a relationship between students in the local primary schools and terminal patients at St Christopher's. The music and

arts in this project play a major role in developing the relationship, with the support of the arts team from the organisation. The beauty of the schools project is, especially, its philosophy, which is based on the local community, in which the view is taken that, 'in order to begin to unravel the complexities of death education and community involvement, vital and pressing questions for hospices and end of life care services must be based on how communities can become engaged in such matters' (Hartley, 2011; Tsiris *et al.*, 2011, p. 100).

Such approaches are particularly valuable in an age when death tends to be forgotten in order to awaken the public in a creative way to the existence of death, from young students to the terminally ill patients. Through death education, it is likely that the participants will come to understand what is to be learned in terms of the need to attain knowledge through experience out in the community. But this still seems, however, to leave one's own death behind, to leave this utmost fear out of the picture.

IMPERSONALISED DEATH

The aim of death education, conducted along these lines, is to understand death and overcome the fear of death. It is supposedly believed that once we admit death as a part of living, we can be relatively relieved out of the *fear* in death and eventually confront death in a cheerful way (Deeken, 2002). In general terms, open discussion on death itself appears a brave enough way to accomplish one of the purposes in death education, which is to understand death, no matter whose death is. And it is true that death education has deliberately served to bring death to people's attention. But then why should one's own death be a problem?

No fear or anxiety over any death is greater than that regarding one's own death. One's own death eradicates everything and brings all to nothing. Let us suppose that an influential teacher declares that death is a part of living so that we must not be afraid but bravely confront it and that this is a means to a *happy life*. But it hardly seems convincing that death is something that we can coolly and confidently face up to: when it comes to *myself* or *my* family or friends, when it comes into our concrete lives, it comes as something dreadful no matter how much we have considerably learned about death, not matter how much we have learned to reason through what happens. The death that we are meant to experience is not something we experience ourselves. Hence, it remains uncertain what it is we are to 'face up to' in death education. If it is genuinely to deal with the fear of death, the challenge must be taken up of overcoming my utmost fear, fear of *my* death.

On the contrary, In social and cultural contexts, what students encounter in death education is death as events or as objects of experience, happening outside of themselves, and with various forms of cultural symbolisation. Consequently, the opinions that children come to form about death will depend on this understanding of cultural practice, which does not even come close to their own concrete death.

Even in the case of therapeutic approaches or grief counselling, which constitutes a large part of death education, the therapy mainly focuses on overcoming grief by sharing feelings with others. Although children who are bereaved may make up their own minds about death, this will hardly be related to the deaths of others and not to their own death. In this case the fear of death

still remains since one's own death is not in question when death is understood primarily in terms of a shared or generalized anxiety.

The problem is that the attitude to another's death may be something impersonal (Kneller, 1958, p. 109). This impersonal attitude can exist alongside the illusion that one can live forever, since the dead person is not oneself. Asking whose death is in question in current educational practice reveals the fact that it is the other's death that is taken as the means to overcome the fear of death.

It might be said that considering other's death may allow us to think of our own death, perhaps as a result of the experience of the grief. Indeed, it might be claimed, death education practice is intended to lead us to a point where we can face up to the fact that we all die, and this can engender an authentic understanding of death and enable us to overcome our fear. However, it can also fail to do this since the image of death so often distorts the way that death must really come to us. As Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith and Paul Standish put this:

Here in particular there seems to be the possibility of the imaginative, vicarious confrontation with the experience of death and the topic of death is something to which young people can readily to drawn. Authenticity of aesthetic experience seems to be of critical important in arts education, but the possibilities of fantasy and distortion that arise in relation to death are also evident (Smeyers, Smith and Standish, 2007, p. 92).

In this respect death education needs to avoid creating a kind of fashionable mystique of death, which itself will stand in the way of young people considering better the nature of their mortality. At the same time, it remains to be proved that it is possible to convert the culture of death, a consideration of the deaths of others, into an understanding of one's own death. At this point, a question inevitably arises that how individuals turn from these images of other's death towards the death that is our own.

THE POSSIBILITY OF UNDERSTANDING MY DEATH

Although death education mostly deals with the deaths of others as discussed above, it is implausible to insist that we are not able to understand our own death at all. Rather, death seems to appear from time to time in forms of anxiety. Heidegger explains that even when Dasein succumbs to its inauthentic existence as 'the They' (Das Man)² there is also the fear of death implicitly.

George Kneller, writing with extensive reference to the existentialists of the middle of 20th century, argues that instead of masking the 'awfulness' of death, we should learn to anticipate it and actually 'run forward (*vorlaufen*) to meet it' (Kneller, 1958, pp. 109–110)—echoing Heidegger's philosophy, which is taken as one source of existentialism. Kneller's suggestion might be adopted as a maxim: children should face up to their own death in order that they overcome the fear of death and can live well. In the light of Kneller's analysis, there are two questions that follow: one is that whether one can *in practice* face up to one's own death, and the other is what *meeting death* means. The former question raises the suspicion that Kneller's

suggestion, although it seems to be radical, in fact remains within the realm of a kind of consolation. The latter purports to catch the spirit of ‘run forward’ and *anticipation*, which is to be derived from death itself. In my view these questions are not far from each other, and rather than answering the latter alone, one can also answer the two questions simultaneously by analysing what the former implies.

To overcome the utmost fear, which comes from one’s own death in the form of anxiety, and to avoid accepting distorting images of death, we must come to the point where *we learn to anticipate it and run forward to meet it*. As Kneller emphasises, this idea comes from Heidegger’s philosophy: *anticipation and running forward* are Heidegger’s own terms for describing the character of human being or, as he prefers to put this, *Dasein*.³ Heidegger understands *Dasein* as a being-toward-death, which implies that it is a condition of human being that *I am in dying*:

If such pointed formulations mean anything at all (the basic certainty of *Dasein* itself), then the appropriate statement pertaining to *Dasein* in its being would have to be *sum moribundus* [‘I am in dying’], *moribundus* not as someone gravely ill or wounded, but insofar as I am, I am *moribundus*. The *moribundus* first gives the *sum* its sense (Heidegger, 1985, p. 317, the square bracketed parenthesis is mine).

However, death does not flow up from those events that are the deaths of others. The point is rather that *Dasein* is already constructed by care (*Sorge*),⁴ in which the human being, in its ontologico-existential structure, is explained by being-ahead-of-itself as possibility: this allows *Dasein* to consider its own death as possibility of impossibility.⁵ In the structure of human being, anticipation (*Vorlaufen*) is possible as a form of being ahead-of-itself. Therefore, it is not enough to say that the human being can *think of* death but exists in dying, which indicates the mortality of *Dasein* from its own existence.

Furthermore, it is the ontological understanding of death, the basis of *Dasein*’s existence, that allows *Dasein* its freedom. In Heidegger’s ontology, what one’s own death encloses is nothingness (*das Nichts*), which is an extremity of *Dasein*’s anxiety. Confronting nothingness, *Dasein* realises its ‘thrown’ situation in the world, which is also a dimension of care. In this thrownness, *Dasein* is encouraged to choose and decide to be itself in the name of freedom, apart from what ‘they’ force *Dasein* to be. This also reveals that *Dasein* is a being that must throw itself into a world in which it is already thrown. Throwing itself is possible as *Dasein* is a form of being ahead of itself. In anticipation (*Vorlaufen*) the possibility opens up for *Dasein* of a form of authenticity. Only if *Dasein* anticipates its own death can it be in freedom, the way of authenticity. Heidegger describes the relation between freedom and anticipation as follows:

Anticipation reveals to *Dasein* its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concerned solicitude, but of being itself, rather, in an impassioned freedom towards death—a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the ‘they’, and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious (Heidegger, 1962, p. 311).

Here we find a clue to the meaning of *meeting death*. This is that we are, in our thrown structure, beings in dying but with the possibility of being free from the ‘they’ through the anticipation of our own death. This is a matter less of the emotional impact of death and more to do with the character of human being that is constructed as a result of mortality. What Heidegger’s philosophy implies in this analysis of death is that Dasein has the possibility of taking its death as an issue by means of which it can be free from *They*. The idea of meeting death must be understood in terms of the ontological character of Dasein, which is care.⁶

This does not imply that we should insist on children virtually meeting death. ‘Meeting death’ in this case might be wrongly understood in terms of a kind of suicidal orientation. Rather it is on our recognition that we are beings making a decision to be authentic and that this holds the possibility of understanding one of our existential conditions—that is, death itself. Therefore, as far as we exist, our own death can be encountered in either an authentic or an inauthentic way.⁷

What should be emphasised here, however, is that being-toward-death does not suggest some kind of technical approach in education. There have been many attempts to apply Heidegger’s philosophy in education but these have run into problems—because of unclarity over Heidegger’s philosophy and because of its questionable relation to educational, moral or social issues.⁸ While being aware of the limitations of his thought in relation to education, the meaning of death in Heidegger’s ontology I want to explore how much his philosophy explains or enriches educational thinking by pursuing the question: *what is the meaning of death in Heidegger’s ontology in relation to the concept of wellbeing in death education?*

WELLBEING AS BEING-TOWARD-DEATH

In death education, logic is constructed to the effect that overcoming the fear of death leaves our lives in a state of happiness, as a dimension of our wellbeing. In what sense then can this be seen in terms of happiness? In this relation it is worthy to explore Heidegger’s analysis on Being due to the relation with death and truth.

The question of the meaning of death in Heidegger’s ontology can be approached in the contexts of his books, *Being and Time* and *Kant and the problem of Metaphysics*, the latter of which can in certain respects be seen as the second part of the former. Both books show his intentions in his ontological analysis of death, specifically his linking of mortality and temporality. In the light of this the question can be raised of whether the concept of wellbeing can in the end relate to death.

On the one hand, what is emphasised in the phrase, *Dasein is in dying*, is the finitude of its existence. On the other hand, human being is *not* finite in terms of ontological understanding of Being, which means that the human being can imagine or understand Being in a way that goes beyond human perception. As simply noticeable from the title, *Being and Time*, the main focus of this book is to find the relation of time in the question of Being. Heidegger expects to relate ‘the following series—of the understanding of Being, the transcendence of man, the formative comportment toward beings, and the historical happening in world history of man—to truth and untruth, which all are based on an understanding of Being as well as oriented in respect to

time' (Heidegger, 1991, p. 199). In this process he arrives at his affirmation of the temporality of Dasein, which being-toward-death supports.

Heidegger suggests that time is always the basis of subjectivity, which is the opposite to the conventional view on temporality, which takes it to be an object of experience (p. 198). Dasein itself is constituted out of present, future, and past, and death is constitutive of the futurity of Dasein: as soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die (Heidegger, 1961, p. 289). This is also found in his words in the Davos debate with Ernst Cassirer in 1929. Heidegger states the need:

To bring out the temporality of Dasein with reference to the possibility of the understanding of Being. And it is with respect to this that all problems are oriented. In one direction, the analysis of death has the function of bringing out the radical futurity of Dasein, but not of producing an altogether final and metaphysical thesis concerning the essence of death (Heidegger, 1991, p. 199).

When we look at death as mortality and temporality in Heidegger's analysis, on the one hand, the concept of being-toward-death does not guarantee wellbeing in the sense assumed in contemporary practices of death education: it offers no assurance that we shall live happily. Rather, it is the contingency of beings that Heidegger tries to demonstrate on the way of understanding Being. It seems then that the being-toward-death is not compatible with wellbeing.

On the other hand, if we consider the happiness that is implied in wellbeing in terms of an older sense of *happy*, in terms, that is, of happenstance, then perhaps the idea that death education might contribute to wellbeing can be retrieved. Happenstance refers to 'the nature of chance, including the chance that things may work out well, and this implies the contingency of what happens to happen, and an openness to the possibility of new possibilities' (Lear, 2000, p. 129; Smeyers, Smith and Standish, 2007, p. 82). This is compatible with the manifold structure of Dasein as contingency.

CONCLUSION

My starting question has become a question of the possibility of teaching death from a Heideggerian perspective. What we have seen is that the familiar aim of death education—overcoming the fear of death so that we can live happily—is likely to turn away from one's own death, the utmost fear. Rather what death education teaches is that a culture of death embedded in a series of opinions and information.

We saw also how Kneller insists on the need to face up to one's own death, as implied by Heidegger's philosophy, but it was unclear how the meaning of *meeting death* was to be interpreted in educational practice. In Heidegger, it appeared possible for human beings to consider their own death since, as human, 'I am in dying' from birth. Besides, the care-structure (*Sorge*) of Dasein was seen in terms of Dasein's being-ahead-of-itself, which means that the anticipation (*Vorlaufen*) of death gives some authenticity to the notion of *meeting death*. Therefore, death education is possible if one can take up the issue of one's own death as the

greatest fear to overcome. Furthermore, death appears in Heidegger's analysis of human mortality and temporality as existential characteristics of beings that allow the possibility of finding the meaning of Being. This, I have tried to show, may be compatible with wellbeing insofar as this is understood in terms of contingency.

The relation of Heidegger's philosophy to death education appears limited except outside of the claim that death can be taught in the light of its ontological importance. In this paper I have tried to explore the possibility of teaching death, and this has led me towards the possibility of teaching happiness in terms of contingency. What Heidegger's philosophy shows is not how this might be taught but rather its possibility. Although Heidegger gives few direct answers for educational practice, he raises questions regarding more knowledge and truth, and the relationship between the student and the teacher, all of which address us to the need for rethinking what we do in education. In this respect Heidegger's philosophy is not the end of a question, but a starting point for education that few have ever reached before.

NOTES

1. For more information on the brief history of death education, see Wass, H. (2004).
2. The They (*Das man*) is one of Heidegger's unique term indicating ordinary people who live daily life with little awareness on their existence. Heidegger often refers to the They as Dasein's being in an unauthentic way.
3. Heidegger deliberately avoids such terms as 'human being' or 'man' on the grounds that these are fatefully burdened by associations and connotations that deeply distort the nature of our being-in-the-world, and he adopts instead the term '*Dasein*', which means literally 'being-there'.
4. Heidegger shows that the inner character of time is part of the ontological structure of Dasein. This is found in Care (*Sorge*), which is a structure of Dasein, and the ancient fable concerning the demi-goddess *Cura*, which Heidegger quotes in *Being and Time*, is a story of how the human being was named. Care is an existential structure, which indicates Being-ahead-of oneself, in connection with Dasein's facticity and its fallenness into the world (*Geworfenheit*). This structure corresponds to the structure of time. Besides, Heidegger quotes the ancient fable, a story of how Saturn (the god of time) named humans in the course of a dispute between Jupiter, Earth, and Care. The story helps to show why Dasein's existential-ontological structure is Care. At the same time, Heidegger picks up the point that it is in time that the 'primordial' structure of human being is found. The possibility of anticipation in being-toward-death is also supported in the structure of care. In this way, the futurity of Dasein is shown by death.
5. It is worthy to compare the meaning of death in Heidegger's philosophy to the conception found in Levinas. While death is the phenomenon of freedom for Heidegger, it is the experience of dreadful pain for Levinas. In Heidegger, freedom appears as to be an authentic existence in the form of being forward death. Experiencing the possibility of impossibility which indicates death is related to the freedom of Dasein whereas the ontical death is experienced in pain according to Levinas. He states that 'death is an event of reaching the ultimate limitation of possibility for us being in agony while it is an event of freedom for Heidegger' (Levinas, 2001, p. 78). Due to the differences in interpretation, death is the impossibility of possibility for Levinas whilst it is the possibility of impossibility for Heidegger (Kang, 2001, p. 143). In my view, Heidegger focuses on rather the ontological features of Dasein or oneself while Levinas considers more on others out of the painful co-experience in relation to death. Levinas' interpretation on death is vividly considerable to build a co-existence relationship with others. In this article, however, the meaning of death is mainly dealt with the possibility that one can actually understand one's own death. In Heidegger's philosophy, it appears possible based on the fact of existence.
6. Care (*Sorge*) in Heidegger's sense refers to the way that for Dasein things matter; something is always at stake. This is not to be confused with certain more familiar and sentimental senses of the term or with its prominence

in 'care ethics'.

7. In early Heidegger, the concept of authenticity and unauthenticity frequently appears. Both concepts are seldom related to the matter of right or wrong. The concepts are related to Heidegger's understanding on the contingency of truth. 'Truth itself is unified with the structure of transcendence on the most intimate level in order for Dasein to be a being open to others and to itself. We are a being which holds itself in the unconcealedness of beings. To hold oneself in this way in the openness of beings is what I describe as Being-in-truth, and I go further and say: on the grounds of the finitude of the Being-in-truth of human being, there exists at the same time a Being-in-untruth. Untruth belongs to the innermost core of the structure of Dasein' (Heidegger, 1991, p. 197). According to Heidegger, truth and untruth consist of Dasein. Therefore, being authentic is on the decision (*Entschlossenheit*) of Dasein holding the possibility of being unauthentic.
8. One argument is found in the field of philosophy and education particularly on death. In the 1960s, when existentialism was widely influential, an argument was raised on applying Heidegger's analysis of death in the educational field for three years. The key point of the argument is that there is little chance of applying Heidegger's philosophy in education and an even greater possibility that he will be misread. Professor Donald Vandenberg took issue with *Existentialism and Education* by G. F. Kneller, claiming at first that Kneller was misreading Heidegger, then Anthony DeSoto protested against Vandenberg's criticism on the grounds that it was Kneller's intention in the book was only to interpret Heidegger's thought in relation to education. Finally, in the following year, Vandenberg made clear his point of view, saying that he was trying to read Heidegger correctly while missing the educational implications. (See more, Vandenberg, D. (1965), 'Kneller, Heidegger, and Death', *Educational Theory*, 15(2), pp. 217-229; Desoto, A. E. (1966), 'Heidegger, Kneller, and Vandenberg', *Educational Theory*, 16(3), pp. 239-241; Vandenberg, D. (1967), 'Kneller, Heidegger, And Death', *Educational Theory*, 17(2), pp. 176-177).

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